Voices from the Field:

"Sounds Great, But I Don't Have Time!"
Helping Teachers Meet Their Goals and Needs
With Media Literacy Education

Cynthia Scheibe

Division of Interdisciplinary and International Studies, Ithaca College, Ithaca, NY, USA

I first became aware of the power of media literacy for education back in the mid-1990s, returning from the National Media Education Conference in Los Angeles inspired and ready to convince our local teachers to begin teaching media literacy. I met with dozens of librarians and teachers in upstate New York, offering media literacy workshops designed to imbue them with my enthusiasm and ideas. To my delight, I found that they quickly grasped how important media literacy could be in helping students prepare for life inside and outside of the classroom, and they were as excited as I was by the prospect of developing media literacy skills in their students. But I also heard a consistent refrain from these dedicated and hard-working educators: "Sounds great, but I don't have time. I have all of this other stuff I have to teach, I just don't have any time to fit in anything else."

So while I wanted all teachers to immediately begin incorporating media literacy into their work with students, I realized it would be crucial to start from what teachers already needed to teach and to provide as much practical support as possible. That meant working closely with curriculum chairs and librarians, becoming familiar with state and local learning standards in a wide range of curriculum areas, and identifying ways in which media literacy approaches might help students perform better on standardized assessments. It also meant providing resources and media content for teachers to use in the classroom, as well as training in media literacy theory and pedagogy.

At the time (in the 1990s), a major focus of media literacy in the U.S. emphasized protecting children from harmful media messages—especially those of a commercial or violent nature (e.g., Healy, 1998; Singer and Singer, 1998; Strasburger and Donnerstein, 1999). In that view, media industries were the problem and those advocating media literacy worked to identify inappropriate media content, increase government regulation, and decrease children's media use. But that kind of protectionist approach doesn't really meet the needs of teachers, nor does it reflect the concept of "literacy" extended to multiple media formats. We don't teach children to read in order to protect them from bad books; we teach them to read and write because those are essential skills for navigating our world. The same should also be true for teaching media literacy skills in schools: the goal should be empowerment rather than protection.

In contrast to media effects approaches that draw from a range of theories in social psychology, psychophysiology, and communications (Bryant and Oliver, 2009), our media literacy approach is theoretically grounded in the cognitive constructivism of Piaget and Vygotsky (Daniels, 2001; Flavell, 1963; Smith, Dockrell and Tomlinson, 1997) and the critical pedagogy of Freire (1973, 1998) and Zinn (2003). It builds on the work of many earlier media literacy educators (including Len Masterman and David Buckingham in England; John Pugente and Neil Anderson in Canada; and Renee Hobbs, Elizabeth Thoman, Kathleen Tyner, and Alan November in the United States).

When we started Project Look Sharp at Ithaca College in 1996, we did so with the goal of creating curriculum-driven approaches to media literacy. This meant presenting media literacy primarily as pedagogy rather than a separate content area, with an emphasis on building critical thinking, analysis, and communication skills that could help students do better on

the tests, participate more in class, and be actively engaged in their own learning. It also meant applying media literacy frameworks to a wide range of media forms—including books—and addressing multiple purposes and perspectives of media messages, not primarily focusing on commercial ones. Working from the learning standards and specific school curricula for that district or curriculum area, we helped teachers develop parallel tasks for students to practice analysis, synthesis and communication skills, with the added benefit of increased student engagement (especially for students who are disenfranchised or have different learning styles). All of this gives teachers a "two-fer"— allowing them to teach their core content and at the same time be able to teach media literacy.

During the past 15 years, with the rise of No Child Left Behind and an increasingly complex media world, this need for educational multi-tasking has become even more important. I used to find the "no time" lament to be most common among secondary teachers, but over the past several years that somewhat panicked response has trickled down to elementary school. Last month I was introducing our new K/1 nutrition and advertising lessons to teachers at a local school, when a kindergarten teacher said, "I wish I could, but I just don't have time. I have to teach all sorts of reading and math content now that I never had to teach before, and I just can't fit everything in as it is."

The growing time pressure that teachers face actually comes in two forms, both of which need to be resolved successfully in order for media literacy education to gain a real foothold in U.S. schools. First, teachers constantly face the challenge of trying to fit all of the content and engaging activities into the school day and school year, without having to give up other equally important—and often required—curriculum material. Second, whenever teachers decide to incorporate something new into their teaching, they face increased preparation time (at least initially); when the new approach includes special training or the use of new technologies, that increased prep time may be substantial.

This is not just a problem for K-12 teachers; it is at least as much of a challenge— perhaps more— in undergraduate teacher education programs where most of the courses and content is mandated for certification. And conversely, because media literacy education is not taught in teacher education programs, most K-12 teachers do face increased prep time in learning

how to incorporate it into their teaching. As media literacy educators working in staff and curriculum development, we face a real challenge in trying to solve this dilemma.

But we can rise to that challenge, and we must. At Project Look Sharp, we know that media literacy really can help teachers meet both their own needs and the educational goals they have for their students. We also know that media literacy approaches often energize both teachers and students; they're memorable and engaging, especially for students who may have never participated in class discussions before. They also build the much-touted "21st century skills" of critical thinking and effective communication that are key to all areas of education. And there are ways that we as media literacy educators can help teachers integrate media literacy into their teaching without adding the need for more class time.

For example, the Core Principles of Media Literacy Education (CPMLE) are especially useful for teachers trying to find ways to incorporate media literacy into their overall pedagogical approach, especially the "implications for practice" accompanying each principle, and the Key Concepts and Key Questions for media analysis that are part of CPMLE #1. Since the purpose of media literacy education emphasizes developing habits of inquiry, teachers might consider starting out the school year with a few general media literacy lessons designed to introduce those questions and concepts. By laying down the groundwork for media analysis early, it will be easier to incorporate media literacy into other curriculum lessons later on. At Project Look Sharp I've been incredibly lucky to work closely with many outstanding teachers who are dedicated to building effective and meaningful approaches to media literacy integration, especially our Director of Curriculum and Staff Development Chris Sperry. His thirty years of experience teaching social studies and media studies in the Ithaca City School District has kept us well-grounded in critical pedagogy and constructivist educational theories. Here are some other "lessons from the field" that we've developed in our work with K-12 educators across the northeastern United States.

Become familiar with the content and approaches that are already part of each curricular area at different grade levels. This allows a media literacy educator (or school librarian) to identify rich media examples that might be used to teach core content while students also engage in media decon-

struction and/or a comparison of information across different types of media sources (CPMLE 2.2, 2.4). This may be as simple as letting teachers know about existing media literacy materials that meet their needs (e.g., from media literacy kits, organizations or websites), or it might involve identifying and collecting a set of media materials that fit specific lessons. Many of Project Look Sharp's curriculum kits (available free online at http://www.ithaca.edu/looksharp) grew out of these types of collaborations with teachers in our local school districts.

Adapt an existing lesson or activity. In observing classroom practice (sometimes as parents in our own children's classes), we have noticed many activities or assignments that could be improved by incorporating a media literacy twist without taking additional class or teacher preparation time.

Take current events, for example. In an effort to get students interested in current events by reading newspapers, teachers often have students do something like this: find three newspaper articles about current events (local, national and international), summarize each one on a note card, and then present them to the rest of the class. When my own daughter was asked to do that, she always found the shortest articles possible, copied the information without really thinking about it, and neither she nor the other students remembered much about the events afterwards. So while the goal was an admirable one, the assignment didn't really work to meet that goal.

A media literacy approach to the same assignment might be to have each student find three newspaper articles all about the same current event (from different newspapers), summarize the event by drawing on information in all three articles (including information inferred from the headlines and accompanying photographs), present the information about the event to the class and comment on the similarities and differences between the sources in the ways they reported on the event (CPMLE 1.4, 2.2). This takes the same amount of class time, but offers a much deeper experience for the students because they've had to use analytical and synthesis skills. This approach has the added benefit of serving as a parallel task in preparation for answering document-based questions frequently found on social studies assessments.

There are many other ways of adapting existing assignments or lessons to incorporate elements of media literacy without necessarily adding time. When doing reports on other countries or cultures, for ex-

ample, in addition to learning about the country's flag, imports/exports, and government, students can also find out about the country's media (including finding out how much of their popular media are imported from the U.S.). When writing original poems, students might select images from magazines to illustrate their poems or create video poems by combining selected footage with voiceovers reading their poems; in both cases, students would also reflect on their choices and the difference that the imagery might make in the interpretation of the poem's meaning (CPMLE 2.2, 6.2). In physical education, different types of music might be played during exercise, running, or sports drills (think *Dead Poets Society*), coupled with a class discussion about how the different pieces of music influenced the students' speed, patterns of movement and performance.

Encourage students to "read" and discuss information presented in different media formats. In English classes, for example, students typically read and discuss novels and plays; after they have completed the "real work," they may also be shown a film of the play or novel (but more or less as reward, with little discussion of the film's presentation of the story). Teachers may easily argue that they don't have time to do a deep discussion and analysis of both the film and the novel, and that of the two, the book would be more important to discuss. However, they can actually use the same amount of time (and deepen the experience) if they use only selected scenes from one or more film versions of the book or play, integrating them during the reading rather than saving them for the end. By taking the time to contrast how the story is presented in different formats (including how a written scene is interpreted by different directors), students will get a much deeper sense of literary aspects like point-of-view, symbolism, and setting. It also works well to draw in students who are not strong readers; discussion of the film scenes may help build understanding of the characters and plot that will then help them when they return to reading the play or novel (CPMLE 3.3).

The same skills can be fostered by encouraging students to learn specific concepts and ideas from videos and radio newscasts as well as from standard print-based and web sources. This is likely to work more effectively if only short segments from video or audio materials are used, with the lights left on, and pausing the audio/video tape frequently to discuss important points or ask questions (rather than showing

entire documentary films with the lights turned down). This process conveys that audiovisual materials can be important sources for active learning, rather than simply entertainment (CPMLE 2.5).

Zero in on the specific priorities or challenges identified by school administrators for a given school or year. If improving math or reading scores is a top priority, then developing media literacy materials or lessons that facilitate those needs will provide much needed support for teachers as they grapple with meeting that priority. If a school is faced with growing problems in race relations among students, then media literacy educators can play an important role in developing curriculum approaches to help address that challenge using media production and analysis (CPMLE 5.1, 5.3, 6.2).

Ten years from now, I believe that media literacy education will be widely recognized as an integral part of K-12 and post-secondary education, on par with the more traditional literacy practices of reading and writing. Until that time, it is up to us as media literacy educators to help teachers find effective ways to work media literacy into their teaching practice. Time is always going to be a challenge for those of us involved in education: so many wonderful activities to try, so much to learn, so many places to go. But if we can find ways to demonstrate how media literacy can meet the existing needs of teachers, administrators, support staff, and students themselves, then our educational system will embrace media literacy education and its potential to create a new generation of critical thinkers, effective communicators, and active citizens for today's world.

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